

MAR 28 1966

Revealed:

U.S. Talks With Viet Cong

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in Algeria

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By Andrew J. Glass
Of The Herald Tribune Staff
WASHINGTON

The United States has been conducting secret diplomatic talks with representatives of the Communist Viet Cong for the last eight months.

A major aim in these negotiations has been to secure the release of a high-level U. S. government official, Gustav C. Hertz, who has been held as a Viet Cong captive since Feb. 2, 1965.

But President Johnson has been prepared to extend the range of these indirect dealings to questions involving a

settlement of the Viet Nam war if the Communists showed their good faith by releasing

Mr. Hertz.

These discussions were opened last August through Algiers, the capital of neutralist Algeria, where the Nation Liberation Front, the Viet Cong's political voice, has maintained a mission since 1962.

The initial approach to the Algerian government to act as an intermediary was made, with the consent of the White House, by Sen. Robert Kennedy, D., N. Y.

Last fall, when discussions

over Mr. Hertz' release were at a critical stage, Sen. Kennedy offered to fly secretly to

Algiers in a U. S. military plane to meet with a high Viet Cong official who would turn Mr. Hertz over to the Senator.

In exchange for Mr. Hertz, the U. S. and Saigon governments would have swapped Nguyen Van Thai, 34, who is being held under a sentence of death as one of two terrorists who bombed the American Embassy in Saigon last March 30, killing 22 persons. The other terrorist was shot dead on the spot.

Although these negotia-

tions, which were held in the highest secrecy, fell through, they have recently been revived in South Viet Nam.

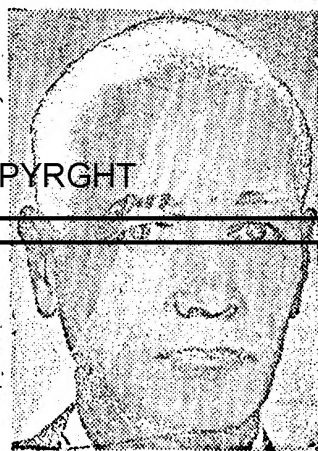
Aspects of the Hertz case have been known to several Washington newsmen for some time. But until yesterday, the Administration succeeded in keeping the matter from being published on the basis that its disclosure could cost Mr. Hertz his life.

However, a brief account of the negotiations appeared in yesterday's editions of the New York Daily News in a dispatch filed from Saigon.

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Gustav Hertz

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The Washington Post then published a fuller version on its front page yesterday.

Privately, officials here feared that these accounts may have compromised their delicate efforts to affect a Hertz-Thai exchange—which has reached another critical stage. They still hoped, however, that the deal might go through, despite the publicity.

Both the White House and the State Department refused to discuss any aspect of the Hertz affair yesterday. Sen. Kennedy also declined to comment. He cut short a skiing vacation in Vermont to return to Washington last night.

Mr. Hertz, who is 48 and the father of five children, served until his capture as chief of the U. S. AID mission's public administration division in Saigon. He was seized while riding a motorcycle in the city's suburbs.

The captured official's brother, A. Burke Hertz, is a lawyer and a Northern Virginia neighbor of the Kennedys. It was he who originally enlisted the Senator's aid.

For some months, the Pres-

ident and Secretary of State Dean Rusk have acknowledged the administration has made "contacts," with the Viet Cong, as well as with the government of North Viet Nam, although the nature of these "contacts" had never been revealed.

But the official U. S. policy has been that the Viet Cong are merely puppets of the Hanoi regime and therefore do not constitute an independent entity with whom a peace settlement could be negotiated.

Because of their humanitarian scope, revelation of the talks with the Viet Cong in Algiers and elsewhere is expected to have a minimal impact from the standpoint of domestic politics.

But the effect of the publicity on the political stability of the Saigon regime remains an unknown. That government has been kept fully informed of the talks, through its Embassy here.

Sen. Kennedy's role in seeking to obtain Mr. Hertz' freedom began with a request to former Algerian Premier Ahmed Ben Bella to act as the intermediary. The request was forwarded through Cherif Guellal, the 34-year-old Algerian Ambassador to the U. S.

The efforts continued, now under the direction of the White House, after Mr. Ben Bella was deposed in a military coup by the present Premier, Houari Boumedienne.

At one time, U. S. officials proposed a broader exchange of 10 prisoners on each side, but nothing came of this effort.

At still another point, Mr. Hertz was brought by his Viet Cong captors to the outskirts of Saigon where, it was hoped, he might be ransomed through a large cash payment by the Central Intelligence Agency.

This plan, however, also fell through at virtually the last moment. Subsequently, the U. S. has renewed the talks on the basis of a one-for-one swap—Mr. Hertz for the Communist terrorist.

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